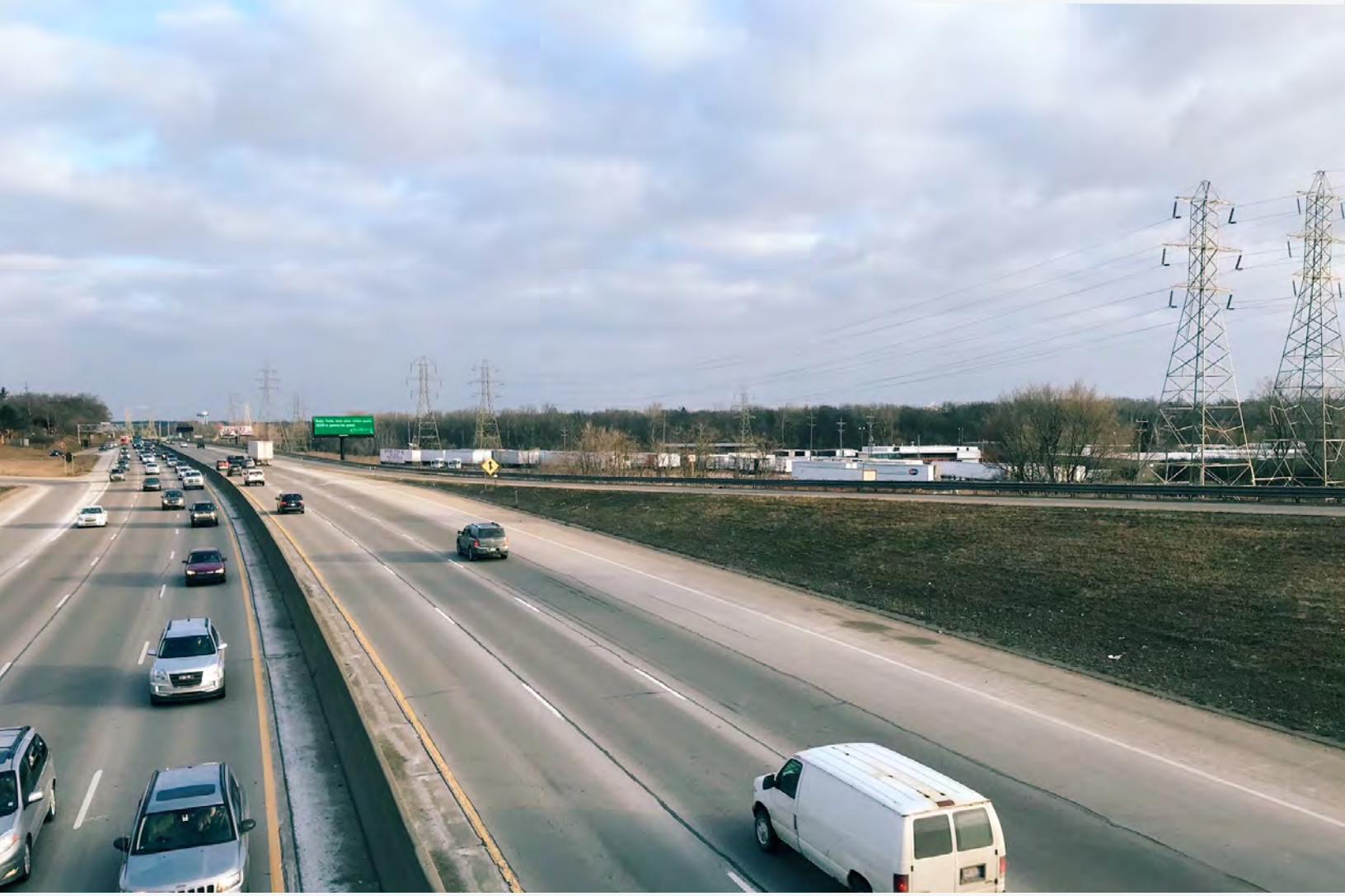
US-131
PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL LINKAGES (PEL) STUDY

MDOT
Michigan Department of Transportation



Phase 1
Public Engagement
Frequently Asked Questions

CATEGORIES

- General PEL Study Questions
- Infrastructure
- Traffic Operations
- Cost of Investment and Funding
- Safety

What is a PEL study?

Planning and Environment Linkages (PEL) represents a collaborative and integrated approach to transportation decision-making that considers environmental, community, and economic goals early in the transportation planning process. It helps to identify issues early in the planning process, provides flexibility and can shorten the formal environmental review process, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), for future construction phases within the PEL study area.

Why was this segment of US-131 selected as part of a PEL study?

During the original I-96 and US-131 PEL study, this section of US-131 was identified as a focus area by MDOT, local stakeholders, and the public. In addition, two other locations were identified for further study:

- US-131/100th Street interchange in Byron Township (completed in fall 2020)
- I-96 at Fruit Ridge Avenue in Walker

This segment of US-131 has the highest volumes of any roadway in Michigan outside of Metro Detroit and still retains the original pavement and bridges as were built in the early 1960s. As the Metro Grand Rapids area and west Michigan continue to grow, it is critical that this section of US-131 have an improvement plan established to ensure the reliable, safe, and efficient movement of people and goods in this area.

When is the study expected to be completed?

There are three main phases to the US-131 PEL study:

1. Develop Purpose and Need Statements and Evaluation Criteria for Draft Alternatives (survey closed in February 2021)
2. Develop and evaluate Draft Alternatives (spring to fall 2021)
3. Select Acceptable Alternative(s)

All three study phases will include public and stakeholder involvement opportunities. After the Acceptable Alternative(s) are selected, this will be included in an official US-131 PEL study report, which is transmitted to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). MDOT intends to complete this report in summer or fall 2022. Implementing these improvements will depend on statewide priorities and funding levels.

How can I find out more information about the US-131 PEL study and stay current on the study process?

MDOT has a project website for the US-131 PEL study at ***www.Michigan.gov/US-131PEL***.

Resources include:

1. Purpose and need statements
2. Project schedule and updates
3. Public outreach and meeting materials

The website also includes a contact form for submitting questions directly to MDOT at any time during the study process.

Is the PEL study the only forum for public engagement for future work on this corridor?

The PEL study is not the only public engagement forum for future work in this corridor. After completion of the PEL study, there will be additional opportunities for comment during the formal NEPA Environmental, project development, and building phases. At this time, there is no schedule for the next steps of this project beyond the PEL study.

Will MDOT be straightening out the S-Curve?

The S-Curve (between Wealthy Street and Pearl Street) carries US-131 over the Grand River and various local roads, and was rebuilt in 2000 to address structural deterioration issues. With standard maintenance practices, the bridges in this section, which make up a majority of the S-Curve, are expected to remain safely in service for at least another 50 years.

As a result, for the purposes of the PEL study, it is assumed that the S-Curve will remain in place as currently built. Any potential future efforts to "straighten" the S-Curve would require extensive study, as it would likely involve the demolition of the existing structures, extensive purchase of private and public property, displacement of homes and businesses, and the resulting mitigation efforts to rectify the displacement of those affected and environmental impacts.

Will MDOT be adding travel lanes? Would that solve the traffic congestion in the corridor?

Given the high levels of traffic and congestion in this segment, MDOT will be examining ways to add operational capacity to the corridor. This could potentially be accomplished through a combination of adding through-lanes, adding merge/weave lanes between interchanges, changing ramp configurations, and adding widened shoulders. MDOT will focus on not only meeting the current capacity needs but also what the needs could be over a longer-term (20-plus year) time horizon. Data trends and forecasts show that the US-131 corridor will continue to be a high-demand vehicular travel corridor, especially as growth continues in and around Grand Rapids.

Could MDOT remove Hynes Avenue on the east side of US-131 between Burton Street and Franklin Street?

Hynes Avenue serves as a local access drive for businesses and industries between the existing railroad freight yard and US-131. Future improvements must consider reasonable access for these businesses and industries, access to and from US-131, and access to other east-west streets (Hall Street, Franklin Street, etc.). Modifications will be considered with the PEL study, where feasible.

Has MDOT considered closing the interchanges that cause the biggest issues?

Design, placement, and potential removal of interchanges will be examined during the draft alternatives development phase. Careful consideration will be needed when examining the impacts of a partial or full interchange closures. Affected traffic may divert to another nearby interchange within the PEL study corridor that is not operationally capable of facilitating the increase in traffic, along with substantial impacts on local streets. Freeway access needs will need to be balanced with safe traffic operations.

Will MDOT be lengthening on and off ramps at interchanges?

Modernizing the interchanges along US-131 to help improve their safe operations is expected to be a primary focus of the PEL study. One element of this will be to provide longer ramps that prevent the queuing at these interchanges from impeding the flow of traffic along US-131 during peak commuting times. The potential extension (and relocation) of ramps will be evaluated to determine any resulting impacts on adjacent properties and consider traffic safety.

Can MDOT buy the railroad freight yard on the east side to add more room for mobility improvements on US-131?

The purchase of the railroad freight yard would be cost prohibitive, along with the mitigation efforts for the displaced railroad. MDOT, local agencies, and the railroad would be required to identify an alternative site for the railroad freight yard, which would impact other areas of the region and may not be environmentally and/or economically feasible. MDOT may discuss with the railroad the feasibility of modifications to the existing freight yard, as long as the operational needs of the railroad can be accommodated.

In addition, the railroad provides significant service within the area and regionally. Any efforts to remove the railroad freight yard may result in more truck traffic within the area and may also have implications on businesses that rely on the railroad.

Will MDOT consider creating a bypass of the downtown for travelers not destined for Grand Rapids or Wyoming, or other alternatives?

Generally, MDOT's statewide focus is on preserving existing state highway and bridges. Based on recent and historical traffic counts and travel monitoring data, the majority of trips on US-131 are destined to Grand Rapids or Wyoming. A bypass would not serve most of the traffic using US-131, have impacts of its own, and be cost prohibitive. Even if a bypass option is considered, US-131 would remain in place to provide access to Grand Rapids and Wyoming.

Alternatives will be identified and evaluated in later stages of the PEL study process.

Will MDOT consider tolling this segment of US-131?

Tolling on state freeways is currently being assessed at a statewide level, as required by Michigan Public Act 140 of 2020. Any proposed improvements will not preclude future tolling options, where possible.

Could MDOT limit truck travel during rush hour and peak periods?

Travel restrictions may be considered as an option further into the study process. However, any restrictions on traffic may be subject to local, state, and federal laws, regulations, and policies. In addition, alternative access and mobility must be identified if restrictions on modes are implemented. US-131 is a vital north-south corridor that serves businesses and industries in west Michigan. Reliable, safe, and efficient mobility is essential for these businesses to support economic vitality in the area.

Will MDOT consider high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) or express lanes?

Both options may be considered during the later phases of the US-131 PEL study. Relatively speaking, the US-131 PEL segment is short and inclusion of either HOV and/or express lanes may have minimal benefits without similar improvements made elsewhere along the corridor. Further analysis, adjacent property impacts, and statewide policies on tolling would need to be considered for either options.

Will MDOT be making improvements on roads other than US-131?

MDOT does not have jurisdictional authority on local roadways or other mobility networks outside of US-131, the existing US-131 interchanges, and Hynes Avenue. MDOT's jurisdiction generally includes I, US, and M routes. Future improvements outside of MDOT's jurisdiction, including bike paths, sidewalks, and crossings within the study area, will also be considered in future phases of the US-131 PEL study and require coordination with the responsible local agencies.

Did MDOT consider investing in transit or light-rail options rather than rebuilding US-131?

A balanced approach to transportation service is needed along major corridors like US-131 to attempt to accommodate multiple travel options and demand. To help with this approach, MDOT provided matching funds for the Silver Line Bus Rapids Transit (BRT) service, which parallels US-131 on Division Avenue. MDOT also provides ongoing state funding for BRT operations. However, US-131 traffic volumes have continued to increase, even with the BRT service. Improvements to US-131 are needed to address growing traffic volumes and will not preclude future transit options on the freeway itself or parallel local routes. Federal and state transportation funds also have some legal limitations on how funds can be spent.

Did MDOT consider using the 2020 Rebuilding Michigan Bond Program funds to make improvements to US-131?

The Rebuilding Michigan Program ("bonding") was established to provide long-term improvements to existing facilities, primarily freeways in large urban areas in Michigan, which required little to no operational changes, unless previously identified and environmentally cleared. Due to the substantial growth of the west Michigan area, age of the freeway infrastructure, importance of this corridor for regional mobility, and public and stakeholder feedback, further study was needed before a specific project was identified for US-131 in the PEL study area. However, the Rebuilding Michigan program will provide funding to rebuild US-131 from the Allegan/Kent county line north to 76th Street.

In addition to larger infrastructure reconstruction efforts, will MDOT be considering smaller scale safety and operational improvements?

Over the past 15 to 20 years, MDOT has invested in several different safety and operational improvements in Kent County. These improvements include installation of 27 dynamic message signs (DMS) and more than 60 closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras. There is nearly end-to-end camera coverage of US-131 and several strategically placed DMS throughout the area for notifying motorists of traffic impacts, such as congestion, incidents, or work zone lane closures.

In 2020, MDOT installed two wrong way driver detection systems on northbound US-131 as a pilot for measuring the effectiveness and accuracy of these devices to improve safety. These systems detect drivers traveling southbound in the northbound lanes of US-131, send a video clip to the MDOT West Michigan Traffic Operations Center for verification, and activate flashing LED wrong way signs to alert the wrong way driver.

Other improvements include implementing a queue warning system on US-131 in and around the greater Grand Rapids area, which is planned in 2023. This system typically uses a type of vehicle detection for monitoring traffic volumes and speed, and automatically activates warning signs to inform motorists of stopped or slow traffic ahead. The goal of this system is to reduce rear-end crashes that occur when drivers are surprised by sudden slowdowns or stopped traffic.

Incorporating innovative Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) solutions, along with improvements to US-131, will ensure a reliable, safe, and modern mobility network.

Please refer to the question below for information regarding feasibility of an active traffic management/flex Lane option in this section of US-131.

Could MDOT lower the speed limit along this segment of US-131?

Speed limits on roadways in Michigan are established primarily by MCL 257.628 of the Michigan Vehicle Code. State law requires that MDOT and the Michigan State Police jointly set speed limits that are based on the 85th percentile speed, which is the speed at or below which 85 percent of drivers are currently driving in a given section of roadway. For example, if 85 percent of drivers on a section of road are driving 55 mph or less, the 85th percentile speed would be 55.

Michigan uses this methodology because it is the national standard for setting speed limits, recognizing that the great majority of drivers instinctively drive at a speed that is safe and comfortable based on the roadway design and other factors. This also results in fewer conflicts between vehicles, which lead to unsafe actions such as tailgating and improper passing.

Will MDOT consider active traffic management (ATM)/flex lanes options?

ATM, also referred to as flex lanes, is a type of traffic management system that allows vehicles to use enhanced shoulders of a freeway during peak travel times or for other identified situations to improve mobility and safety. Examples include US-23 north of Ann Arbor and a planned system on US-131 between I-96 and Post Drive north of Grand Rapids.

ATM requires that freeway shoulders meet certain standards, such as 11- to 12-foot shoulder widths, to safely accommodate traffic when the lane is open. Motorists are informed that these flex lanes can be used via lane control signs over the roadway, which are strategically placed throughout the freeway segment with flex lanes. Flex lanes may also be used for other purposes, such as partial closures or incident management. The system is operated by a central controller, such as the MDOT West Michigan Traffic Operations Center (WMTOC).Along with the section of US-131 north of Grand Rapids, MDOT has analyzed possible implementation of ATM strategies for the rest of the US-131 corridor in the greater Grand Rapids area, including sections of the PEL study. This includes the traditional flex lane concept, as well as other options, such as freeway ramp metering. However, these options are limited or not feasible in the US-131 PEL study segment due to current geometric constraints, such as limited shoulder widths, accessibility, etc. Future improvements to this segment of the corridor will consider these options and attempt to not preclude incorporation of these strategies during later phases of the PEL study process.

For more information about Intelligent Transportation Systems, the MDOT WMTOC, device locations, and to review performance and other related reports, please visit the MDOT WMTOC webpage at ***www.Michigan.gov/WMTOC***.

Will MDOT be improving or adding shoulders or an emergency lane for first responders and incident management?

Yes, providing improved shoulders along the freeway is a modern design standard and helps with managing traffic and responding to safety incidents. Many of the congestion issues in the corridor are related to safety incidents and having improved shoulders would allow for the impacts of these events to be minimized. Shoulders are also valuable for maintenance work and future improvement projects to maintain safe traffic flow.